

## Holland Classis Overture: Rescind the 2017 General Synod Action Which Interpreted the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109

The Holland Classis overtures the General Synod of 2018 to take the necessary action which has the effect of rescinding or nullifying R-17-29, the statement of the 2017 General Synod regarding Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108 and 109.<sup>1</sup>

### Reasons

1. The action by the 2017 General Synod created significant ambiguity in the use and meaning of the vows for ministry, i.e. the Declaration of Licensed Candidates, the Declaration for Minister of Word and Sacrament, and the Declaration for a General Synod Professor.
2. The action of the 2017 General Synod set a new protocol in the historic Reformed Church in America. The ramification of this protocol opens the way for the Standards to become contemporary pawns in a tug of war over meaning of words.
3. Historic precedent calls for the present church to restrain itself from attempting to interpret historic standards in a present-day context. Examples:
  - a. In 1972, the General Synod received an overture from Classis of Cascades [Overture #9] that “a thorough restudy of the answer to question 80 of the Heidelberg catechism be made with the intention of changing the answer to fit the situation today in order to foster Christian love and unity among sincere Christians.” The answer by the Synod: Since the Heidelberg Catechism is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action.” (MGS 1972, p. 87-88)
  - b. Also at the 1972 General Synod, the Classis of East Sioux sent an overture to the General Synod [Overture #32] “to take action which will provide that Question and answer 98 of the Heidelberg Catechism be removed into a footnote with the explanation that those in the ministry of the Reformed Church in America need not commit themselves to the position of not using visual aids in the teaching ministry of the church. Question 98 reads as follows: Q— “But may not pictures be tolerated in churches as books for the laity?” A— “No; for we should not be wiser than God, who will not have his people taught by dumb idols, but by the lively preaching of the Word.” The answer of the General Synod: Since the Heidelberg Catechism is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action” (MGS 1972, p. 99).
  - c. The Classis of East Sioux also sent Overture #33: “To take action which will provide that in the Belgic Confession Article XXXVI, the following words be removed into a footnote with the explanation that those ordained into the ministry of the Reformed Church in America need not commit themselves to this position. Concerning Magistrates: “And their office is, not only

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<sup>1</sup> 2017 MGS pp. 161.

to have regard unto and watch for the welfare of the civil state, but also that they protect the sacred ministry, and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of antichrist may be thus destroyed, and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must, therefore, countenance the preaching of the word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone as he commands in his word.”

The answer by the Synod: Since the Belgic Confession is an historical document speaking to a particular point in time, it is not subject to revision, but still offering opportunities for teaching today, WE RECOMMEND no action” (MGS 1972, p. 99-100).

- d. The 1972 General Synod Minutes also records this action: “A motion from the floor was ADOPTED to refer overtures 9, 32, and 33 to the Theological Commission for study and report back to the 1973 General Synod” (MGS 1972, p. 88, 99, and 100).
- e. Report of the Theological Commission to the 1973 General Synod: Overtures from the Classes of Cascades and East Sioux suggesting changes to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession were referred to the Commission for study and report.

“The commission has studied and discussed the matter of revisions to the historic standards of the church. While we recognize that certain minor changes and omissions have been made in recent editions of the doctrinal standards with regard to matter where history has changed the evaluation of the church, we believe it is desirable to maintain the integrity of these standards as historical witnesses to the biblical faith. Therefore, we support the recommendation of the Overtures Committee that the Church refrain from revision of these great historic documents. In this light we wish also to reaffirm our support of the church’s effort to add to our historic doctrinal standards a new confession of faith.” (MGS 1973, p. 194)

In other words, the Synod has stated that we are to refrain from attempts to contemporize these historic documents.

- 3. The use of a General Synod declaration in 2017 to force a contemporary meaning on a word which is contained in a four-centuries-old sentence is a grievous error to the Catechism, an affront to our commonly held RCA understanding of the value of the Standards, and merely a foil in our current discussion of human sexuality.
- 4. The legislative action of 2017 only brings confusion in the church. Some assume the statement means more than what is true of General Synod statements. Some observers assume such a statement to be a stance of the church, when it is merely an opinion of one General Synod.
- 5. To rescind the action is a recognition that the 2017 General Synod overstepped its limits.